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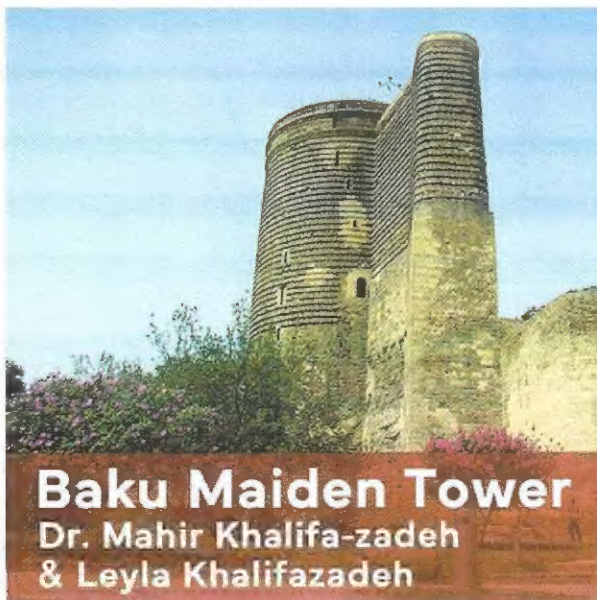
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NEW HISTORY



Baku Maiden Tower
Dr. Mahir Khalifa-zadeh
& Leyla Khalifazadeh

BAKU'S MAIDEN TOWER:

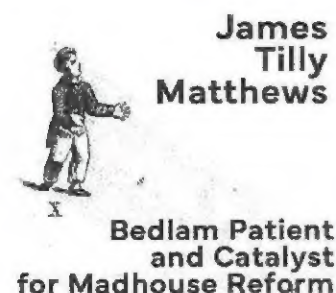
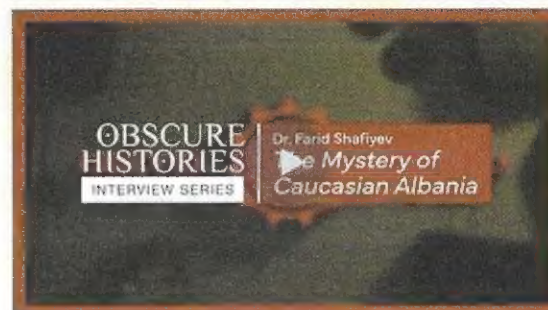
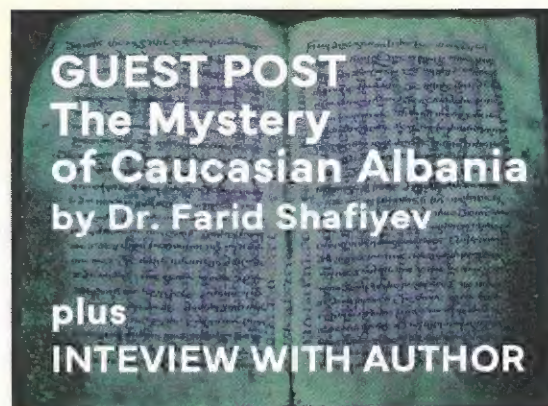
ZOROASTRIAN LEGENDS AND ARCHITECTURAL MYSTERIES

Dr. Mahir Khalifa-Zadeh & Leyla Khalifazadeh

The Baku Maiden Tower in Baku, Azerbaijan has a long and mysterious history, complete with stories of legendary warriors and even its own ballet.

Dr. Mahir Khalifa-zadeh and Leyla Khalifazadeh take us through the rich Zoroastrian tradition associated with the Maiden Tower, and why it's meaningful to people in Azerbaijan and beyond.

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NEW



Baku's Maiden Tower: Zoroastrian Legends & Architectural Mysteries

<https://www.obscurehistories.com/post/baku-s-maiden-tower-zoroastrian-legends-architectural-mysteries>

by Prof. Mahir Khalifa-zadeh* and Leyla Khalifazadeh**



Baku's Maiden Tower, in Baku, Azerbaijan, Wikicommons

Baku's Maiden Tower is a major architectural and historical landmark in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. The tower is rooted deeply in the ancient history of Azerbaijan, but the reason for its design, purpose, and the date of construction remain unknown. The Maiden Tower is a source of legends and epics that enrich Azerbaijan's cultural heritage and identity, including ancient legends about the tower and more recently, as seen in poetry and ballet. In particular, we argue that these ancient legends are rooted in the history of Zoroastrians in Azerbaijan, a "[land of fire](#)." The legends, we believe, mirror the Zoroastrian origin of the tower; however, an academic answer is still elusive.

Introduction

Azerbaijan has a long history that dates back to the Zoroastrian era (from the fifth century, BCE). As some scholars have indicated, Azerbaijan (called "Adurbadagan" in Pahlavi, or Middle Persian) was a place where the prophet Zoroaster was born.[1] It is also said to be where one of two copies of the Zoroastrian religious text, the [Avesta](#), was kept in the sacred fire temple - [Adur Gushnasp](#). Present-day Azerbaijan has many places related to Zoroastrianism as well, one of which is [Ateshgah](#), a pilgrimage site and current philosophical center for Zoroastrians, which is near Baku.

Baku has a rich historical and cultural heritage embedded in the history of Azerbaijan. The Maiden Tower (Azerbaijani: *Qiz qalası*) is a legendary landmark. In 2001, the Tower, along with Baku's Walled City (Old City) and the Palace of Shirvan-Shahs, were included on UNESCO's [World Heritage List](#).

Background

There have been extensive academic discussions about the origin, purpose, and date of construction of the Maiden Tower. Some scholars, particularly Sara Ashurbeyli, believe that the Maiden Tower is a paramount example of Zoroastrian and pre-Islamic architecture in Azerbaijan.[2] Hassan Hasanov argues instead that the tower is a pagan monument of Scythian — Sakka — Cimmerian culture and is related to the Scythian Flaming Goddess — Tapati.[3] On the other hand, Davud Akhundov insists that Baku is the ancient Atash-i Baquan (fire of victory) fortress, which had a fire temple-tower to the Zoroastrian God, Ahura-Mazda. [4] He argues that Baku's Maiden Tower is a Holy Fire Temple-Tower of Zoroastrians, which had seven fire exits on the top symbolizing the Zoroastrian "seven steps" or "seven skies" to reach heaven. [5]



Overhead shot of Baku's Maiden Tower, with the buttress formation jutting to the side.

Notably, the word "Atash," or "holy fire," as it is well-known, has an Zoroastrian Avesta origin. Historically, it evolved to "Adur" (in Pahlavi) and finally into the Turkified form "Azar" or "Azer." "Azar" is the core of "Azarbaijan," or nowadays Azerbaijan, descending from Parthian "Aturpatakan," meaning "a place where the holy fire is protected." [6] Azerbaijan — or the Sassanids' "Adurbadagan" — was a religious center of the empire, with Adur Gushnasp in Adurbadagan proclaimed as the most sacred or "cathedral" fire

temple.

Indeed, archaeological and architectural evidence indicates that the Baku Maiden Tower has construction elements [8] built following Sasanian technology. The same technology was implemented in building Darband (now Derbent) [9] — a well-known Sasanian fortress in Adurbadagan [10] (Azerbaijan) on the Caspian Sea.

It is noteworthy that the fortress of Darband was built using the same technology as Adur Gushnasp (now Azar Gushnasp in Takht-i Sulaiman, Iranian Azerbaijan), which has been traced back to the fifth and sixth centuries, CE. [11]

According to the above, if the Baku Maiden Tower shows evidence of Sasanian building technology as Darband fortress has, then it is reasonable to date the tower's construction or repair to the fifth and sixth centuries, CE.



Derband Fortress walls.
Note the square holes in
the masonry. that are
similar to those in the Baku
Tower



Elements of Sasanian building architecture, with
distinctive square holes, Maiden tower, Baku, Azerbaijan

Legends and mysteries

Alongside the mysteries of how and when the tower was constructed, there are many legends related to Baku's Maiden Tower that try to explain its function and design. What was the purpose of the tower? Why does the tower have the kind of design that it has? Above all, however, is the key mystery: why was the tower named Maiden Tower? The tower has generated a rich pool of legends that are referenced in literature and popular culture throughout Baku's history.

The tower is undoubtedly covered by a cloud of legends and epics deeply rooted in Azerbaijan's history, religion, and culture. Some legends have even become the subject of scenarios for ballets and theater plays that have become a part of Azerbaijan's national heritage and identity, as distinctive and impressive as the Maiden Tower itself.

In 1923, Jafar Jabbarli, a prominent Azerbaijani playwright, wrote the poem "The Maiden Tower" (Qiz Qalasi), which is considered a jewel of Azerbaijani literature and culture. In 1940, the Azerbaijani composer Afrasib Badalbeyli adapted this poem as the "Maiden Tower" ballet, the first of its kind in the Islamic world and a world-class Azerbaijani masterpiece starring Gamar Almaszadeh, the first Azerbaijani ballerina and renowned ballet instructor. A revised version of the ballet was performed in 1999.

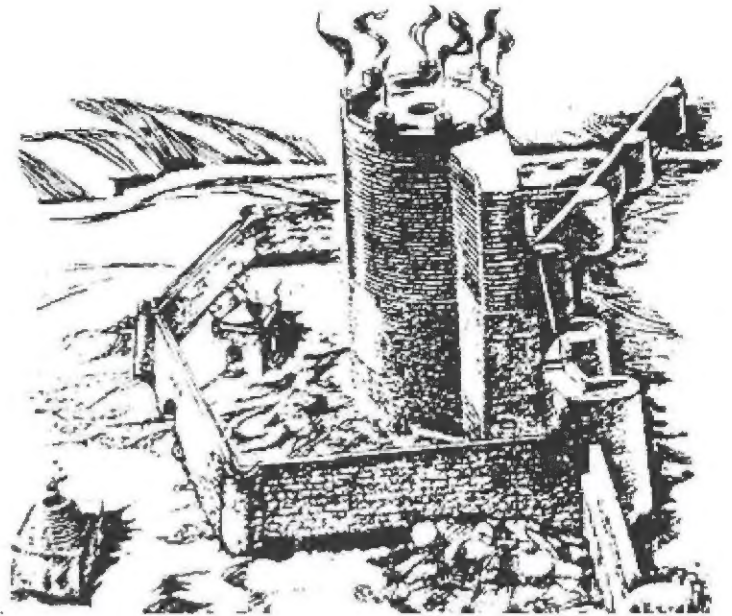
Interestingly, up to twenty legends are related to the Maiden Tower, many set in Baku's medieval or Islamic period. However, a few legends are arguably more deeply rooted, as we believe, in Baku's Zoroastrian or pre-Islamic period.[12]

The most impressive and colorful story of Baku's ancient Maiden Tower is the Zoroastrian legend of the maiden savior with fire-colored hair.

Legend of the Fire-Color-Haired Virgin Girl Savior

A long time ago, there existed the ancient town-fortress of Baku. The fortress had a Fire Temple Tower. At one point in Baku's history, the enemy managed to encircle the fortress. The enemy demanded that the people of Baku surrender, but they refused. Consequently, the enemy launched a siege to demolish the fortress and capture all the inhabitants as slaves. As a result, many defenders of the fortress died while attempting to stop the enemy's attacks.

The enemy's commander ordered the water supply lines cut in an attempt to drive the fortress's defenders into submission. Everybody in the fortress was thirsty. They had no water, nor food - only blood and death. The Supreme Magi, together with other priests, prayed to the Holy Fire kept in the fortress's Fire Temple Tower, asking the god Ahura Mazda to help and protect the people. They prayed day and night, asking the All-Mighty and Merciful Ahura Mazda to save their lives and push the enemy back.



Baku's Holy Fire Temple-Tower (Maiden Tower),
reconstruction by Prof. Davud A. Akhundov

Finally, the supreme god Ahura Mazda heard the magi and people's prayers. One day, people saw a large piece of the Holy Fire falling from the top of the Fire Temple Tower.

A beautiful girl came up from the fire. She had long fire-colored hair. The crowd went down on their knees and started to pray to her. The girl said: "Don't be afraid! I am here to help and protect you! Give me a sword and helmet! The enemy must not see my fire-colored hair. Open the fortress gate!"

Meanwhile, the enemy commander was waiting outside for a one-on-one fight with the fortress pahlevan (hero). If the fortress pahlevan were to win the fight, the enemy's army would retreat, but, if the enemy commander were to win, the fortress would be destroyed and the surviving inhabitants would be enslaved.

The fortress gate opened and the enemy commander saw the fortress's pahlevan was coming to fight. A heavy battle began. In one of the god-blessed moments that ensued, the fortress pahlevan unhorsed the enemy and put a sword directly at his neck. The enemy screamed, "Oh, you win! Who are you? Take your helmet off. I want to see your face, Pahlevan!" She took off the helmet and he saw that the fortress pahlevan was a beautiful girl with long, fire-colored hair. He exclaimed, "Oh, you are a girl! You are a brave and beautiful girl! If the girls of Baku are so brave, I will never capture your fortress! Do not kill me, beauty!"

He fell in love with her because of her beauty and bravery and asked her to marry him. Of course, the girl did not kill him, fell in love with him because of his open heart.

Ultimately, the enemy did not capture the Baku fortress, and the locals named it the Maiden Tower (Qiz Qalasi).

A Second Version of the Maiden Savior[13]

Long ago, the fortress city of Bade-Qube (Baku) was besieged by the enemy. Bade-Qube had three rows of defense walls, but they had all been encircled by the enemy.

After the siege had gone on for ninety days, the rulers knew they must act. Inside the fortress close to the sea, there was a high and black steaming tower temple in which old rituals were performed to save the Holy Fire. The temple's principal magus, Egirwand, performed old fire rituals, proclaiming to the fire worshipers: "Tomorrow, the Shah will be killed by the unknown and virginal power." The temple door suddenly opened and a virgin girl with flaming hair came out. She was illuminated by the temple's holy fire and held a flaming sword in her hands. Covered by the flame, she exited the temple and stood by the principal Magus. The Magus said, "You must save the holy city, a capital of eternal fires, and save the Tower that created you."

Thus, the moonface flaming girl looked for the last time on the temple-tower and went into battle with general Nureddin and his troops. She kept her promise and saved her countrymen, but she fell in love with the enemy general, whom she had killed. She thus decided to kill herself, stabbing her own shoulder with her sword and giving her soul to the Holy Fire Tower. After she killed herself, the Khazri and Gilavar winds blew strongly for seven days. Since then, the temple fires have stopped burning, and the temple was named the Maiden Tower (Qiz Qalasi) after the holy virgin girl savior.



Baku Maiden Tower, painting, Tahir Salahov

The last legend we present indicates the tower's Zoroastrian roots as well.

Legend of Why Baku Tower's Fires Stopped Burning

Once upon a time, an enemy besieged the fortress of Baku. However, the people of Baku refused to surrender and decided to fight on and defend their lives. They fought with great bravery, but the situation inside the fortress grew increasingly desperate. The enemy launched a tight siege to subdue the defenders by cutting water supply.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Magus and other priests prayed to the All-Mighty God Ahura Mazda in the fortress's Holy Fire Temple Tower for assistance.

After several days of continuous prayers, Ahura Mazda heard the priests' blessings and prayers. A strong and devastating earthquake occurred in which the enemy army perished. Thus, the All-Mighty Ahura Mazda destroyed the enemy and Baku's people escaped slavery, but the Holy Fires stopped burning on top of Baku's Fire Temple Tower.

Our Comment: Why is Baku's Tower Named the Maiden Tower?

Apart from the legendary background, there is no historical explanation or archaeological or written evidence describing why the tower was named the Maiden Tower. Therefore, we cannot exclude the possibility of religious explanations.

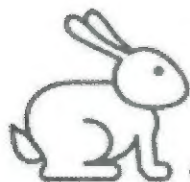
Aside from the fire-haired-savoir legends presented above, there is another possibility for why it is called the "virgin" or "maiden" tower, as indicated by the third legend, as well as the secondary import of the other two: it is possible that the tower was named the Maiden Tower because it was never destroyed by the enemy. From a religious perspective, this meant that the temple would never be humiliated or desecrated by evil (Ahriman or Angra Mainyu in Zoroastrianism). Therefore, if the tower was not desecrated by the enemy/evil (Ahriman), it continues to be "virgin" (untouched) - hence, a "maiden" tower temple of the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda.

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***Leyla Khalifazadeh, university student, Toronto, Canada*

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[11] "Disintegration of Sasanian Hegemony over Northern Iran (AD 623-643)", Iranica Antiqua, vol. 46, 2011, pp. 315-329. | Mehrdad Ghodrat-Dizaji - Academia.edu

[12] These legends are part of a long oral tradition in Azerbaijan. The authors are here compiling these legends from oral memory and as found in the "Lenin Library," or the Russian State Library, as discovered during Dr. Khalifa-zadeh's dissertation research. A version of these legends were originally published on Dr. Khalifa-zadeh's Center's website, www.azglobalcontext.org.

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